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# RSIS COMMENTARIES (20/2007)

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## Adjusting to the New Middle East

*Mohamad Nawab Mohd Osman \**

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THE United States' decision to increase the number of troops in the Middle East, coming soon after the gruesome hanging of former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, is likely to fuel more violence in Iraq. These developments are likely to affect Middle Eastern politics in a significant way. One of the most significant challenges for the U.S. today is the rise of the Shiites in a changing Middle East.

### The Shiite Revival

The Shi'ite revival dates back to 1979 with the Iranian revolution, and then through the 1990's with Hizbullah's emergence in Lebanon; the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 accelerated this revival. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq has had a significant impact on the Arab world. It ended minority Sunni rule in Iraq and empowered the Shiites. This has in turn led to a Shiite revival as a cultural and political force across the Middle East that has the potential to alter regional politics. Iraq has not only encouraged the region's Shiites to demand greater rights and representation, but also to identify themselves as members of a region-wide community that extends beyond state borders. The most important Iraqi Shiite spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani encouraged the Shiites to embrace the political process introduced into Iraq by the U.S. by voting and joining the newly established security forces.

The failure of Arab Sunni authoritarian regimes to respond to demands for political transparency, reform, and the promotion of Arab nationalist agendas, such as confronting Israel, led to the increased dissatisfaction within their respective populations especially the Shi'ites. In 2006 the war with Israel emboldened the influential Shiite Hizbullah movement, and divided Lebanon along sectarian lines. The initial reactions of Arab governments and a number of pro-Al Qaeda jihadi leaders and websites to Hizbullah's campaign were unexpectedly sectarian, departing from the customary unity against Israel. Even Al Qaeda was caught off-guard as it watched Hizbullah steal some of its thunder. The reaction of Sunni rulers and radicals was swift: They denounced Hizbullah's campaign as an Iranian-sponsored Shiite power grab. The war turned Hizbullah and Iran into regional power brokers and brought jubilant Shiites into the streets in Iraq, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Traditional Sunni powers such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt found themselves pushed to the sidelines, unable to influence events.

At the same time, in other parts of the Middle East, the Shiites are an increasingly significant factor. In Syria, the Alawites, a branch of Shiite Islam, continue to hold sway. Iran is perceived as a rising regional power in the Middle East. Iran's influence extends into Iraq where its Shiite allies control the current Iraqi government. During Saddam Hussein's rule, leaders of the Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq had taken refuge in Iran and were supported by the Iranian government. In some sense, the rising

Iranian clout and the regional Shiite revival in the wake of the Iraq war are reinforcing each other. Iran today sees itself as a great power and views its acquisition of nuclear capability as a means to attain that goal.

### **Impact of Sunni-Shiite Divide**

The revival of the Shiites in the Middle East has been met by resistance from Sunni communities. The Shiite-Sunni divide represents the oldest sectarian divergence in Islam, the origins of which go back to the seventh century to a disagreement over Prophet Muhammad's legitimate successor. Over time, the two branches developed their own distinct conceptions of Islamic teachings and practices, giving each its own identity and outlook on a wide range of issues, including society and politics. However, with the exception of the puritan Sunni groups such as the Wahhabis and Salafis, most Sunnis see Shiites as fellow Muslims. In recent years conflicts between Shiites and puritan Sunnis have taken a more violent turn in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. In Iraq, the Sunni insurgency aimed at intimidating Shiites continues to rage. It draws on the puritan Sunnis' belief in their destiny to rule and their anger over the loss of power in Baghdad. The Sunni insurgency also relies on the resources of foreign fighters, radical ideologies, the Ba'ath party and former members of the Sunni officer corps to prevent a Shiite consolidation of power. This is premised on the belief that a hasty US departure will lead to a collapse of the current government and the restoration of Sunni rule.

The sectarian conflict in Iraq has implications for the whole Middle East. The rise of the Shiites in Iraq and the prospect of Iranian hegemony have been a source of concern for Sunni regimes in the region. Saudi Arabia in particular has viewed Iran's gains in Iraq and its growing influence in Lebanon and over the Palestinian issue with alarm. An intensification of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran could threaten regional stability and more importantly fuel pro-Al Qaeda jihadi activism. The rivalry between the two in Afghanistan and South Asia in the 1980s and 1990s served as the context for radicalization that ultimately led to the September 11 attacks in the U.S. Saudi Arabia was known to have supported the Taliban regime and other radical Sunni groups such as the Lashkar-E-Taiba in Pakistan while Iran supported the Northern Alliance -- an alliance of different groups opposed to the Taliban and radical Shiite groups such as the Tehreek Nafaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafariya (TNFJ) in Pakistan. In addition, Saudi Arabia is concerned about the possibility that its own Shiite minority. Accounting only 10% of its population but dominating the oil-rich Al-Sharqiyah province, there is concern that the Saudi Shiites would revolt against the government as a result of developments in Iran and Iraq. The Sunni-dominated regime in Bahrain, a key ally of the Saudis, is also threatened by the heightened Shiite political appeal as its majority Shiite population may attempt to exert more political power.

### **Shifting America's Middle East Policy**

The new realities in the Middle East mean that America must begin to rethink its policies in the region. Washington needs to engage the Shiites as a new force emerging in the region. While the current American policy seems to focus on rolling back Iranian influence as the key to resolving various regional problems, this policy should be rethought. The consequences of conflict with Iran will be grave for the region as this will radicalize the Iranian regime, and more importantly the Iranian public.

Ideological radicalism has not been a staple of popular politics in Iran for some time now. Iranian-supported Shiite groups such as Hizbullah have ceased attacks on American and Western targets since 1999, reflecting a transition to more democratic means to consolidate their support. However, a conflict with Iran may result in these groups activating their sleeper

cells believed to be in existence in parts of the Western world. This will result in America having to deal with another spate of Shiite-inspired terrorist activities.

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\* *Mohamad Nawab Mohd Osman is a research assistant at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*